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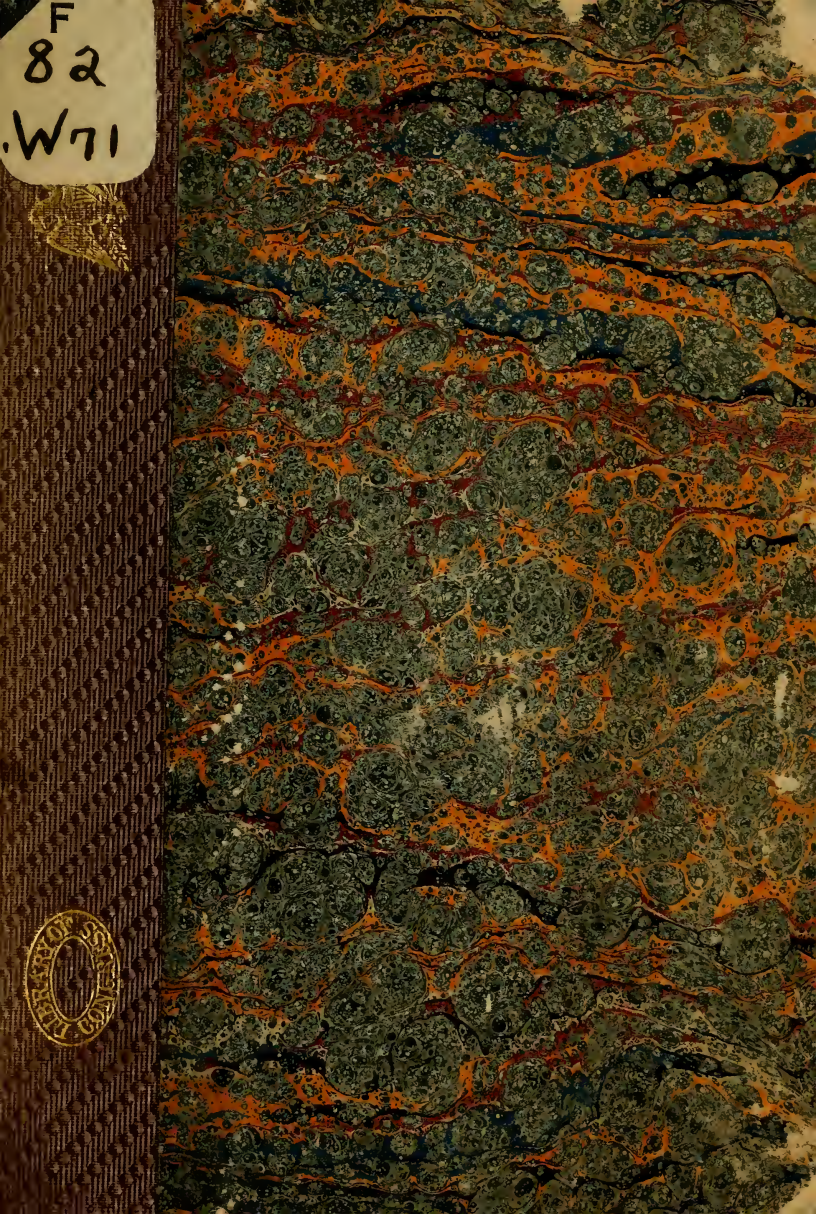

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MEMORIAL

OF

ROGER WILLIAMS.

PAPER READ BEFORE THE RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY,
MAY 18, 1860,

BY ZACHARIAH ALLEN, ESQ.

WERE the characters of great and good men always estimated by the honors bestowed upon them by their neighbors, very few would be deemed excellent. At the present day, as in the olden time, a prophet might receive honors everywhere save in his own country. This has been the case in regard to Roger Williams, the champion of "Soul-liberty," and the first theologian on this earth who ever theoretically advocated the separation of "Church and State," and the first statesman who practically established religious freedom as the constitutional basis of civil government.

So many years have been allowed to pass away during the discussion of the question of erecting a monument over the grave of Roger Williams,—the founder of the State of Rhode Island, that the very locality of it is forgotten. To discover the spot where have rested his neglected ashes for nearly two centuries, recourse must now be had to traditionary testimony, which is fast disappearing. No time is to be lost in recording what may now remain available; for the memory of the aged serves to illustrate the fading events of history, as the lingering rays of departing day afford a last glimpse of the outlines of a glimmering landscape.

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Since the recent researches for the discovery of the grave of Roger Williams, the question is frequently asked, What are the proofs found to establish the identity of it?

To dispel any doubts which may exist in the minds of his descendants, as well as of the people of Rhode Island, who now manifest an interest in honoring the memory of the Founder of their State by the erection of a permanent monument over his ashes, the writer of this memorial has been induced to make researches to identify the place of his sepulture. Born within a few yards of the spring, by the side of which Roger Williams lived and died, and having from early youth felt a lively interest in the history of his sufferings, and of his beneficent labors for the welfare of mankind, the writer has made himself familiar with the spot, and with the local traditions connected therewith, for more than half a century.

Historical records state that the death of Roger Williams occurred in the year 1683, and that he was buried with martial honors. The smoke of the musketry, temporarily hovering in the air over his grave, formed as permanent a mark of respect as was ever bestowed to honor it. Not even a rough stone was set up to designate the spot.

Nearly ninety years after his death, (in 1771) it is recorded that a special committee was appointed by the freemen of the town of Providence to ascertain the spot where he was buried, and to draft an inscription for a monument, which it was then voted to erect "over the grave of the Founder of this Town and Colony." One of this committee, Governor Sessions, stated to his neighbor, Governor Allen, that the committee had satisfactory knowledge of the locality of his family burial-ground, east of Benefit street, where the explorations for the grave have recently been made; but the troubles of the revolutionary war, which ensued, prevented any active exertions for ascertaining the exact spot, and for erecting thereon the proposed monument.

Mr. Moses Brown, previous to his death in the year 1836, at the age of 98 years, was called upon by the writer for the special purpose of obtaining information on the subject in question. Mr. Brown stated that the above described burial lot had always been considered as that of the family of Roger Williams, but that his grave was unknown. He also stated that a large burial ground of the early settlers of the Providence Plantations had existed on the south side of Bowen street, near Benefit street; so called from its having been laid out for the common benefit of access to the rear of the garden lots of the original proprietors.

It appears that the first settlers of Providence laid out their lots with a frontage on King's street, the present North and South Main streets, from Harrington's Lane to Wickenden street, and extending back to Hope street, each lot comprising about six acres. The lots on the west side of North and South Main streets, were reserved for warehouses and wharves, generally comprising two lots of forty feet each, with a gangway on each side for access to the salt water. There were great tracts of woodland reserved for the common benefit of the original proprietors, designated as "stated commons," and

located in the country west and north of the above described lots, which were called "plantations." Hence the name of "Providence Plantations" has been retained to this day as the name of this State in connection with that of the colony settled on the adjacent island of Rhode Island.

The house of Roger Williams was situated on his plantation on the east side of North Main street. The spring known by his name was not on his plantation lot, being on the westerly side of the street, in the range of warehouse lots reserved by him in partnership with the other original proprietors. This spring, within the memory of the writer, was nearly level with the surface of the adjacent ground, welling forth its gushing waters through a short drain into a cask set in the ground for the use of cattle, thence continuing its flow to the river side. The sight of this living spring finally attracted Roger Williams to turn the bow of his canoe to land at this inviting spot, after navigating it around Fox Point.

It was the custom of the early settlers of the Providence Plantations, as it still continues to be of their descendants in the country towns adjacent thereto, to appropriate a portion of their respective farms for a family burial place. In accordance with this custom, Roger Williams selected a portion of his plantation for the place of his sepulture.

The preceding statements establish the locality of the family burial ground of Roger Williams. The identification of his grave rests upon more slender, but still reliable evidence.

A communication from an anonymous writer, published in a newspaper printed in Providence, July 17, 1819, called the *Rhode Island American*, and re-printed in Knowles' Memoir of Roger Williams, (page 432,) contains the following "statement of facts communicated by the late Captain Nathaniel Packard, about the year 1808":

"When Captain Packard was about ten years old, one of the descendants of Roger Williams was buried at the family burial ground on the lot right back of the house of Sullivan Dorr, Esq. Those who dug the grave, dug directly upon the foot of a coffin, which the people there present told him was that of Roger Williams. They let him down into the new grave, and he saw the bones in the coffin, which was not wholly decayed—and the bones had a long mossy substance upon them."

This testimony, although without the authority of a signature, has been corroborated by the more direct and authentic testimony given by the daughter of Captain Packard to Dr. Usher Parsons, as stated in his letter written in reply to inquiries addressed to him on that subject:

"PROVIDENCE, April 18th, 1860.

Z. ALLEN, ESQ.—*My Dear Sir:*——I was informed some five years ago by the late Polly Packard, then more than eighty years old, that she had in childhood often visited the grave of Roger Williams in company with her father, who, in early boyhood, had been put into the grave next to it by his father. The facts in the case were these: Williams's grave had been levelled many

years with the surrounding greensward, and its exact locality lost. In digging another grave for a new interment, the spade man came upon the bones of Williams, being portions of his lower extremities. Many of the inhabitants gathered to see the bones of the Founder of Rhode Island, and her grandfather among them ; who, actuated by a singular whim, lowered his little son, her father, into the grave, probably thinking that the act would make an indelible impression of this discovery upon his son's memory. In process of time, and after she and her sisters had more than once visited the spot with their father, the ground became levelled, and the grave had disappeared.

But Miss Packard seemed confident that she could indicate the exact spot from its bearing and distance from another grave marked by a broken headstone.

I requested her to accompany me to the ground, and the spot she then indicated was exactly where Mr. S. Randall, a descendant of Williams, supposed it to be, from information derived from other sources ; and where, on digging a few days since, he found some relics of an early interment.

Yours truly,

USHER PARSONS."

This direct testimony from family tradition appears to be conclusive evidence of the locality of the grave of Roger Williams. Having been a frequent visitor to this spot and familiarly acquainted with all the traditions relating thereto, the writer's earliest recollections are associated with the excitement caused among his playmates by the breaking of a grave stone, by a colored boy, who had amused himself by rolling small boulders down the steep declivity of the hill-side, directed against this grave stone with the mischievous design of knocking it over like one of a set of nine-pins. This he succeeded in doing, and the fragments of the top of it remained a long time on the spot. On their disappearance, Mr. Dorr, the proprietor of the orchard, caused the lower half, still retaining its erect position, to be removed to a store-house for the purpose of preserving it.

At that time there were a few pointed fragments of rough stone projecting just above the greensward, which were evidently placed there as rude monuments to mark some graves. Mr. Theodore Foster states in his letter to Mr. Williams Thayer, Jr., dated May 21st, 1819, in reply to inquiries about his ancestor's death and burial, (Knowles's History of Roger Williams, page 430,) that when he first saw the spot, " the foot gravestone was gone, and the top of the other broken off, so that only the lower part appeared without any inscription." It is manifest that had there been a stone at the head of the grave of Roger Williams when one of his descendants was buried, as narrated by Captain Packard, the digging in such close proximity to it would have been carefully avoided. Probably Mr. Foster made a mistake in this statement contained in the same letter, relating that " Mr. Williams sold from his estate a lot on the main street to Mr. Gabriel Bernon, a very respectable French gentleman of great property and sincere religion, who came from Rochelle.

France, where he had suffered much and been imprisoned two years on account of his religion; which led Mr. Williams to esteem and respect him." The deed of the lot referred to by Mr. Foster as having been given by Mr. Williams to Gabriel Bernon, (the grandfather of the writer,) has been examined and proves to have been received from the committee of the original proprietors of the colony, and contains the conveyance of the lot in which the spring is situated. Gabriel Bernon was one of the Huguenots who fled from France at the revolution of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, being two years after the death of Roger Williams, thus conclusively showing Mr. Foster's mistakes.

On the fragment of the grave stone still preserved is a part of the inscription, exhibiting the last letter of a name terminating with ———n, probably that of Ashton, which family was connected by marriage with that of Roger Williams.

The remaining inscription records:

"———, who departed this life ye — May, 1739, 63 years ——— her age."

This date confirms the statement of Capt. Packard, that "he was about ten years old when he was let down into the new grave and saw the bones, &c. He was born in 1730, and this inscription bears date 1739.

The following details of the disinterment of the remains contained in the seven graves of this little family burial lot, will be interesting as a historical record of the noble effort recently made by Mr. Stephen Randall to rescue the character of the descendants of Roger Williams, as well as of the people of the State of Rhode Island, from the imputation of a want of reverence for the memory of the Founder of their State.

After the lapse of 177 years of oblivious neglect, the researches for the identification of the grave were finally commenced on the 22d day of March, 1860, in the presence of several gentlemen, who were invited to witness the processes of the disinterment. The assistance of two experienced superintendents of the public Burial Grounds was obtained to direct carefully the researches. Pointed iron rods were procured for piercing through the greensward, to ascertain where the texture of the subsoil might be rendered loose by former excavations, and suitable boxes were prepared to receive the exhumed remains.

The first preliminary operation was the stripping off the turf from the surface of the ground occupied by the graves, all comprised within less than one square rod. The greensward covering the sloping hillside presented to view a nearly uniform surface. After the removal of the turf and loam, down to the hard surface of the subsoil, the outlines of seven graves became manifest, the three uppermost on the hillside being those of children, and the four lower ones, those of adults.

It was immediately discovered that two of the latter adjoined each other, thus manifestly showing, in accordance with the testimony of Capt. Packard, that when the last one of the two was dug, the end of the coffin contained in the other must have been laid open to view. This proximity is delineated on

the plat of the land which Mr. Randall has caused to be made to exhibit the relative positions of the graves.

The easterly grave was evidently the most recent, as the exact shape of the coffin was visible by a carbonaceous black streak of the thickness of the edge of the sides of the coffin, with the ends distinctly defined. The rusted remains of the hinges and nails were found in their places, with some rotten fragments of wood, and a single round knot. The nails are of wrought iron, with the heads flattened edgewise to resemble brad heads. This was done to permit the heads to penetrate deep into the wood and out of sight in the finished coffin.

The utmost care was taken in scraping away the earth from the bottom of the grave of Roger Williams. Not a vestige of any bone was discoverable, nor even of the lime dust which usually remains after the gelatinous part of the bone is decomposed. So completely had disappeared all the earthly remains of the Founder of the State of Rhode Island, in the commingled mass of black, crumbled slate stone and shale, that they did not "leave a wreck behind." By chemical laws, we learn that all flesh, and the gelatinous matter giving consistency to the bones, become finally resolved into carbonic acid gas, water and air, but the solid lime dust of the decomposed bones was here doubtlessly absorbed by roots or commingled with the earth in the bottom of the grave, being literally the "ashes of the dead." This is all that remained to be deposited in the cinerary urns, which in classic days were used for receiving the residue of the human body after being burnt in the brick furnaces that once formed an important appendage to every cemetery.

By the side of the grave of Roger Williams was another, which was supposed to be that of his wife; for wonderfully preserved therein was found a lock of braided hair, being the sole remaining human relic. All else had disappeared in the lapse of more than 170 years, during which this tress of hair had survived every other portion of the body equally exposed to the wet earth.

The reason for which this location had been so soon abandoned as a burial spot became evident in the almost impenetrable hardness of the soil, composed of shale, which rendered necessary the use of steel-pointed bars and picks to penetrate it. So near the surface of ground is the substratum of shale rock, which constitutes nearly the whole mass of Prospect Hill, that water was found percolating the soil at the bottom of one of the excavations which were made.

It appears that in this vicinify, on the gravelly soil a few hundred feet below on the hill side, the Indians once had a cemetery. At the foot of Bowen street, skeletons, with the remains of Indian implements, and a copper kettle, were found. Many of the early settlers of Providence were there buried.

Along the whole range of Benefit street were a succession of orchards planted on the hill-side, above the garden lots. In these orchards were the burial lots of the families which occupied the homes below on the east side of North and South Main streets, commencing with the burial lot of the family of Whipple, at the junction of Constitution Hill with Benefit street; next was

that of Roger Williams's family—of Olney, Waterman, Crawford, Tillinghast, Cooke, Ashton, and others. In the course of modern improvements, most of these remains have been removed to the North Burial Ground. Near Bowen street, whilst cultivating a garden, Nicholas Esten pulled up the fragments of a human skull, attached to the roots of a cabbage.

A similar and very remarkable exhibition of the powers of vegetable life in active pursuit of appropriate nourishing food, even in the depths of a human grave, constituted one of the most interesting phenomena in a philosophical point of view, disclosed during the researches that have been described, serving to show that nothing useful as food for plants is wastefully lost in the economy of nature, and that even our very graves are ransacked by rambling roots, as well as by the crawling worms, that convert every charnel house into a banqueting hall.

On looking down into the pit whilst the sextons were clearing it of earth, the root of an adjacent apple tree was discovered. This tree had pushed downwards one of its main roots in a sloping direction and nearly straight course towards the precise spot that had been occupied by the skull of Roger Williams. There making a turn conforming with its circumference, the root followed the direction of the back bone to the hips, and thence divided into two branches, each one following a leg bone to the heel, where they both turned upwards to the extremities of the toes of the skeleton. One of the roots formed a slight crook at the part occupied by the knee joint, thus producing an increased resemblance to the outlines of the skeleton of Roger Williams, as if, indeed, moulded thereto by the powers of vegetable life. This singularly formed root has been carefully preserved, as constituting a very impressive exemplification of the mode in which the contents of the grave had been entirely absorbed. Apparently not sated with banqueting on the remains found in one grave, the same roots extended themselves into the next adjoining one, pervading every part of it with a net-work of voracious fibres in their thorough search for every particle of nutritious matter in the form of phosphate of lime and other organic elements constituting the bones. At the time the apple tree was planted, all the fleshy parts of the body had doubtlessly been decomposed and dispersed in gaseous forms; and there was then left only enough of the principal bones to serve for the roots to follow along from one extremity of the skeleton to the other in a continuous course, to glean up the scanty remains. Had there been other organic matter present in quantity, there would have been found divergent branches of roots to envelope and absorb it. This may serve to explain the singular formation of the roots into the shape of the principal bones of the human skeleton. These disclosures are corroborated by the artificial use of bones as a manure in practical agriculture.

Similar instances have been noticed in excavating to remove the remains of human bodies from old burial grounds, to reach which the roots of trees have been found extended in nearly a direct line to very considerable distances. The roots of a willow tree have been discovered to have penetrated beneath

the foundation walls of an ancient church in this city, and through the dry earth beneath the floor to lap their fibrous tissues around the skulls and bones buried there. They were silently absorbing into the circulations of the sap vessels the remains of the bodies, as in the instance which has been described.

The question is often asked, how can a tree or plant push out their roots in such direct lines to reach distant deposits of their appropriate food, unless they are endued with some kind of instinctive knowledge to guide them? This supposition of the endowment of plants with any such instinctive intelligence is rendered unnecessary, if it be considered that the gases issuing from decomposing organic bodies buried in the earth, permeate porous soil, and reach the distant fibrous roots. By contact with them, the percolating stream of gases becomes consolidated into woody fibres at the nearest point of contact in a direct line between the root and the decomposing body, forming continuous accretions at the elongating end of the root, until it becomes connected by contact with the source of its nutritious food. This is the natural result of the movement of the gas toward the root of the tree, and not of the movement of the root to reach its food, as appearances might seem to indicate.

These researches for the discovery of the grave of Roger Williams have led to these developments of several interesting facts, showing the actual transmutations of the organic matter constituting the human body. A portion of it appears to have been revived into the wood of the trunk and branches of an apple tree, constituting fuel capable of giving motion to the mechanism of a locomotive engine if burnt in the boiler; and into the fruit capable of exciting movements of the mechanisms of animal bodies when used as food to be burnt in their lungs. Another portion of the less solid matter gives animation to the devouring worms, and the remainder ascends into the air in the form of the gases which are absorbed by the leaves of plants. The incorporation of the lifeless elements of organic matter into the bodies, the grains, and the fruits of plants, and the reincorporation of the latter in the form of food into the bodies of living animals, is unceasingly going on, thus continually reviving and quickening dead organic matter under the control of ever-renewed life and intelligence. Under this view, the entire disappearance of every vestige of the mortal remains of Roger Williams teaches after his death an impressive lesson of the actual physical resurrection of them, by ever-acting natural causes, into renewed states of existence constituting a physical victory over the grave, as his precepts and example, before his death, have taught the greater moral victory of the Christian faith over worldly oppression.

At the close of these careful excavations, and during the disappointment which ensued from finding only a parcel of roots nestled into the place of the remains of the Founder of the State of Rhode Island, all present turned to the innocent looking apple tree, as the thief that had stolen them away. There was no mistake, for it had been caught in the act of robbing a grave and

of appropriating the contents to its own use, re-incorporating them into its living trunk and branches. The swollen buds showed that it was preparing to show off its spoils in a new suit of green leaves, with gay blossoms of many colors, as banners rejoicingly hung out. It was readily anticipated that it would soon incorporate a portion of these spoils into golden cheeked apples to tempt the owner of the orchard to participate in the fruits of this robbery. One of the gentlemen present, impressed with the suspicion that "the partaker is as bad as the thief," exclaimed to the proprietor of the orchard, who was present—"It is sufficiently manifest why nothing is left of Roger Williams, for you have been eating him up in the shape of apples."

The accused party admitted that appearances were against him, and suggested the question that, as his father had planted the tree and eaten most of the fruit, whether he might not himself be considered as one of the family offspring of the old philanthropist ?

The people of Rhode Island have been long reproached for the want of due reverence for the founder of their State. To explain the cause of this neglect, without attempting to apologize for it, reference must be had to the early history of the first settlers of New England.

Extreme hardship and privations awaited all the emigrants who first adventured forth as pioneers to clear away primæval forests, and to battle with the native inhabitants for the possession of their hunting grounds. In these battles the first settlers of Providence became involved, and their town was burnt in revenge for the wrongs committed on the Indians by the neighboring colonies. They had continual struggles for obtaining daily food for the living, with no spare means for erecting monuments over the dead. The pioneer of the ancient forests deemed himself happy when he had succeeded in establishing his family in a log cabin, and in planting a few acres of corn among the huge stumps of trees. At his death, the neighbors gathered around his humble cabin, and bore away his body to a convenient corner of the farm. No sculptor was there to record his name in brass or marble; and the only mark of his solitary grave was the little mound raised above the level of the adjacent green sward by the fresh addition of "earth to earth, ashes to ashes." On the widowed mother of orphan children then devolved, as an only heritage, increased toils with diminished means of subsistence.

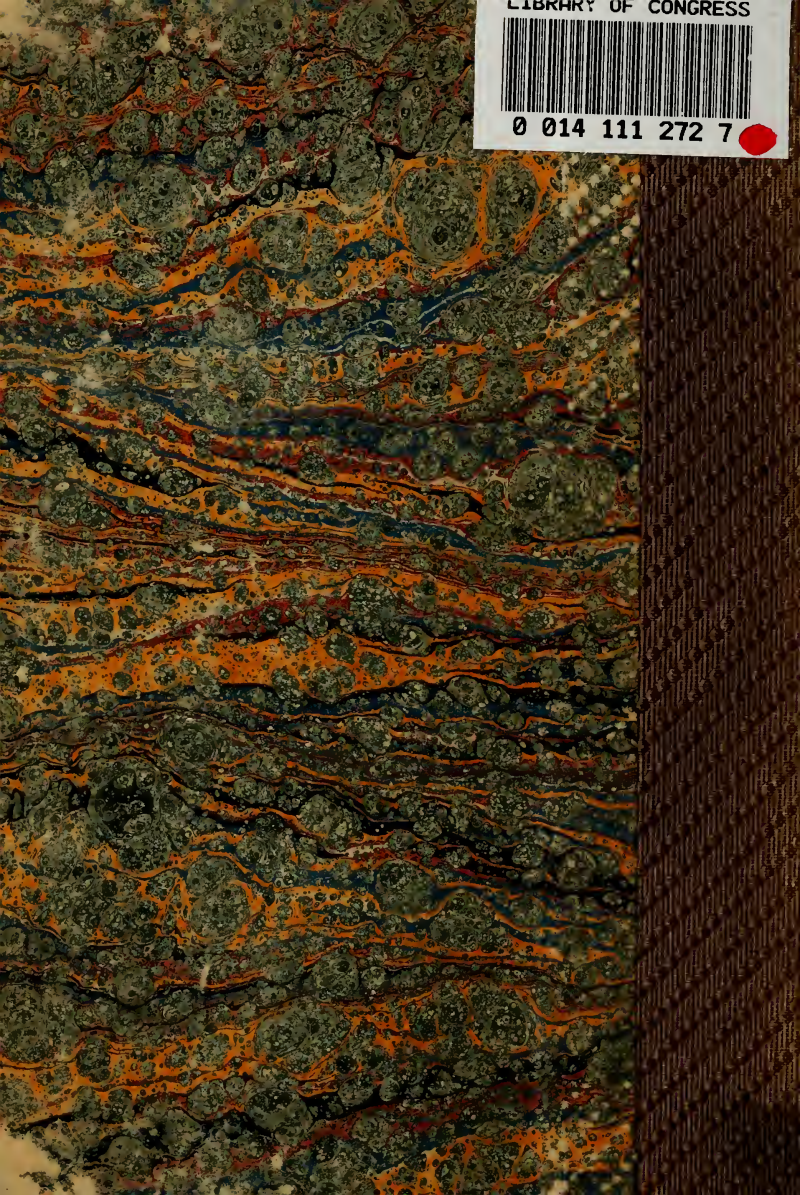
That such was the condition of the family of Roger Williams, is recorded in one of his touching letters describing the visit of his good friend, Governor Winslow: "On departing, he slipped a piece of gold into the hand of my wife, for the supply of my immediate necessities."

Then, again, one of the prevalent sects of Christians in this colony—the Quakers, were conscientiously scrupulous about indulging in the worldly vanity of setting up a stone with a sculptured name to perpetuate the memory of a departed friend, deeming every such memorial of human affections a wicked monument of human pride.

These peculiar conditions of the state of society as it existed during the period of the first settlement of the Providence Plantations, have given an

appearance of stoical indifference, and even of a want of decent regard for the memory of the dead.

This reproach of neglect of the memory of Roger Williams will probably cease with the success of the efforts now making to raise a monument to honor his name. Ample means of wealth and luxury have followed in later days the early period of privations; and the people of Rhode Island will now appear to be unworthy participants of the blessings of civil and religious liberty, If they continue longer to neglect to honor the great champion of human rights, who first on their favored soil established "soul liberty" as the basis of civil government, and proposed the separation of "Church and State" throughout the world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